

ENTRY

Puritans in Colonial Virginia

SUMMARY

In the 1620s and 1630s, several hundred Puritan men and women emigrated from England and settled in **Virginia** [<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/colonial-virginia/>].

Puritans protested the retention of certain Catholic practices in the **Church of England**

[<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/church-of-england-in-virginia/>] and sought religious reform. As the Crown began to enforce conformity to the established church, English Puritans looked to Virginia both as a land of opportunity and as a haven where they could form godly communities of fellow believers and worship in churches without what they perceived as extraneous ceremony.

These men and women mainly settled south of the James River, where they formed their own churches, elected and dispatched delegates to the **House of Burgesses**

[<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/house-of-burgesses/>], and made every effort to create and preserve a religious community. But the rest of the colony hardened toward them, particularly after **Sir William Berkeley**

[<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/berkeley-sir-william-1605-1677/>] arrived as governor in 1642. Berkeley, under orders from King Charles I, began to push almost immediately for religious uniformity and adherence to the Anglican church. Between 1643 and 1649, a series of controversies, legal challenges, and local power struggles arose between Puritans and Anglicans, exacerbated by news of the **English Civil Wars**

[<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/english-civil-wars-and-virginia-the/>]. Intolerance toward Puritan believers resulted in the expulsion of several Puritan clergymen and at least one lay preacher, and, by 1650, led most Virginia Puritans to abandon the colony for Maryland.

Contributor: Kevin Butterfield

Background

Puritanism was a religious reform movement that began shortly after Queen Elizabeth I took the throne in 1558. Its adherents sought to rid the Church of England of its “popish,” or Catholic, elements, seen as holdovers from English religious practice prior to the



Reformation. (The episcopal structure of

Anglican services and the use of formal prayers and litanies contained in the

Book of Common Prayer, for example, were practices the Puritans wished to eradicate.)

But, as historian Darrett Rutman has pointed out, Puritans are too often defined in terms of what they were against. Puritans were intensely devout, evangelical Christians who believed that all people were born evil and that only the predetermined grace of God could save them. Thus, Puritans sought to form godly communities of fellow believers, worshiping in churches stripped of all extraneous ceremony.

Emigration to and Settlement in Virginia

Over the first third of the seventeenth century, and especially following the ascension of King Charles I to the throne in 1625, disputes over the degree to which the Church of England should be reformed became more heated. When England became more hostile to separatists who wanted to leave the Anglican Church and reformers who wanted to fix the Church, the New World



Queen Elizabeth I



Charles I and Family

emerged as a possible haven: in Virginia,

religious differences were generally secondary to the struggle to establish a viable colony. As early as 1609, however, at least one minister at **Jamestown**

[<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/jamestown-settlement-early/>] created an “unhappy dissension” among the colonists for being “somewhat a Puritan.”

In the 1620s, Puritan leaders began to establish religious communities on the south side of the James River. Christopher Lawne, a leading Puritan who had settled in Holland for a time, emigrated to the Southside region with other dissenters in 1619; in November 1621, the **Virginia Company**

[<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/virginia-company-of-london/>] granted land to Edward Bennett, a Puritan merchant from London, and other men “who undertook to settle 200 persons in the colony.” Bennett established a large property called Bennett’s Welcome near the former Indian village of Warraskoyack. His nephews, Philip and **Richard Bennett** [<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/bennett-richard-bap-1609-ca-1675/>], soon followed. By the end of the 1630s, the Bennetts held more than 10,000 acres in the colony. The Lawne and the Bennett families helped introduce several hundred Puritans to the southern reaches of Virginia. Another Puritan colonist, Daniel Gookin, transported nearly fifty people to the colony and, under the headright system, received a grant of 2,500 acres along the Nansemond River.

Religious and Political Unrest

By early in the 1640s, a large Puritan community had settled south of the James in the counties of Isle of Wight, Upper Norfolk (designated Nansemond in 1646), and Lower Norfolk, where they planted **tobacco**



**Detail from Virginia and Maryland As
it is Planted and Inhabited this
present Year 1670**

[<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/tobacco-in-colonial-virginia/>], elected men to the House of Burgesses, and even had a presence on the **governor's Council** [<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/governors-council-the/>] with the appointment of Richard Bennett in 1642. As in other parts of Virginia, there were not enough ministers to serve the area's parishioners (a statistic from 1650 estimates one minister in the colony for every 3,239 Virginians), leading Philip Bennett to travel in 1642 to Massachusetts Bay Colony with a petition, signed by some seventy persons, requesting that three Puritan pastors relocate to Upper Norfolk County. A personal letter to the Reverend John Davenport of New Haven from William Durand, one of the forty people Richard Bennett brought to Virginia in 1635, suggests the Puritan mindset of the day and conveys why the Puritans may have requested the New England ministers: God

had condemned “many poore soules in Virginia” for their ungodly conduct, wrote

Durand, and “if ever the lord had cause to consume the cittyes of Sodom and Gomorrah he might as justly and more severely execute his wrath upon Virginia.”

John Winthrop, the governor of Massachusetts Bay, granted the Virginia Puritans’ request, noting that the people of New England now had the opportunity to ensure the “advancement of the kingdom of Christ in those parts.” In January 1643, the New England ministers—William Thompson, John Knowles, and Thomas James—arrived in Jamestown. Winthrop wrote that, upon their arrival, the dispatched ministers “found very loving and liberal entertainment ... by some well disposed people who desired their company.”

Unfortunately for Virginia’s Puritan community, Governor Sir William Berkeley, who had arrived in Virginia in 1642, was not among the well-disposed. Berkeley was fiercely loyal to King Charles I, who sought to prevent in Virginia the type of religious and political unrest that had led to civil war in England. Berkeley had been ordered to oppose any religious nonconformity within Virginia. The colony’s ministers



Sir William Berkeley

were to swear an oath of allegiance to the

Church of England; those who did not would be expelled. A short time after the New England ministers' arrival, according to their contemporary Edward Johnson, "the Governour and some other malignant spirits" ordered "all nonconformists" out of the colony. Before the year was out, the three men returned to New England, taking some Nansemond Puritans with them.

About a year later, on April 18, 1644, some Virginia Indians under the leadership of **Opechancanough** [<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/opechancanough-d-1646/>] launched a devastating attack on English settlements in Virginia. Several hundred Virginians were killed, but the Puritan community was spared. (Virginia's Puritan settlers were no strangers to Indian attack, however; twenty-two years earlier, nearly half of the planters at Bennett's Welcome had been killed in an assault that also had been ordered by Opechancanough.) Some Puritans interpreted the attack as divine vengeance for the government's treatment of the New England pastors. Others reasoned that the Indians attacked because, as Winthrop recorded in his journal, they "understood that they [the English] were at war in England, and began to go to war among themselves ..."

Indeed, tension between the colony's Puritan and Anglican settlers was rising. The news of the civil war raging in England had widened the divide between the two religious groups; meanwhile, the Berkeley administration, perhaps hoping to decrease political opposition within the colony, passed increasingly aggressive conformity policies. Men

who had tacitly endorsed Puritan pastors early in the 1640s ceased to do so, and certain

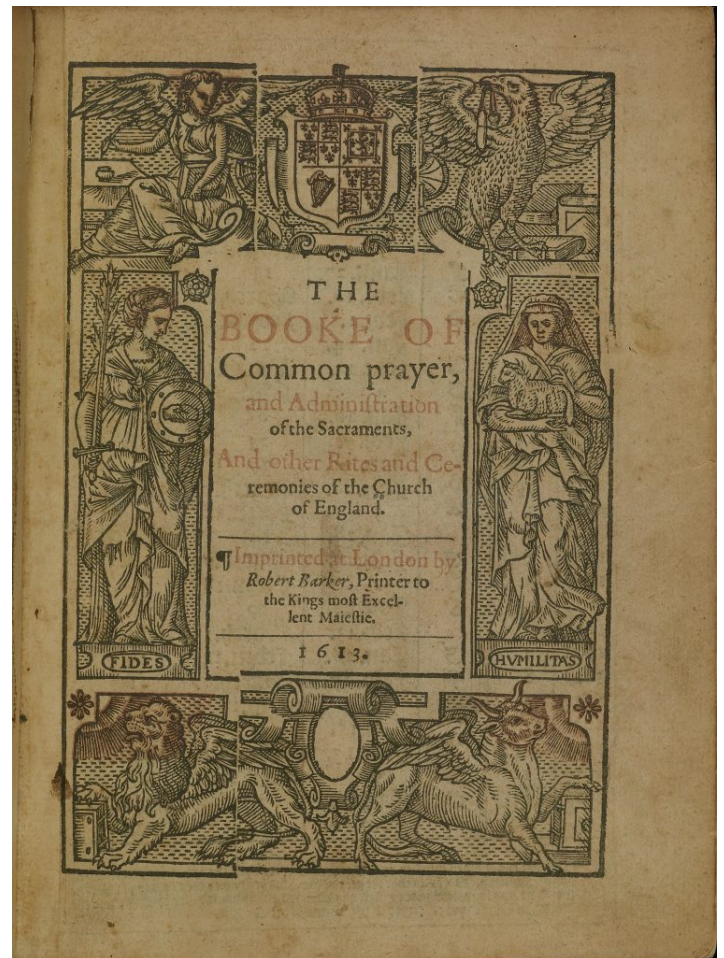
vestry [<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/parish-in-colonial-virginia-the/>]

leaders began to crack down on Puritan religious leadership.

This conflict played out in miniature against the backdrop of Lower Norfolk County late in the 1640s. In April 1645 Thomas Harrison, the Puritan minister of the county's Elizabeth River vestry, was charged with criminal nonconformity "for not reading the booke of Common Prayer and for not administering the sacrament of Baptisme according to the Cannons and order p[re]scribed." Harrison was well liked by the parish, and had been unanimously approved by the vestry five years earlier, but certain influential

members of the parish opposed his nonconformity. In fact, most Puritan ministers rejected the Book of Common Prayer, and Parliament had even abolished it on January 3, 1645. But Berkeley continued to enforce its use in Virginia.

Harrison left Elizabeth River by 1647 and began ministering in neighboring Nansemond County, which had been without religious guidance since the New England



The Booke of Common prayer

ministers were driven out in 1643. Durand, acting as a lay preacher, began ministering to the Puritans of Lower Norfolk in Harrison's stead. In November 1647 the General Assembly passed an act reinforcing the use of the Book of Common Prayer by allowing parishioners to withhold tithes from nonconforming ministers. With this law, Berkeley's government delegated the enforcement of religious uniformity to individual parishes. On May 28, 1648, Durand was arrested at church by the county sheriff. With Durand's arrest and trial, the lines between nonconformists and Anglicans became more clearly drawn: those who supported Durand were declared "Abettors to much sedition and Mutiny." Shortly after the arrest, Berkeley became involved and banished Durand and Harrison from the colony.

Emigration to Maryland

During this time, Maryland had emerged as a safe haven for Puritans. Many of Virginia's Puritan men had traveled there in the winter of 1646–1647 as part of a mercenary army assembled by Richard Bennett to return Leonard Calvert, the exiled governor of Maryland, to his position, and some had remained. Durand also settled in Maryland after his banishment and, by 1649, most of the Puritans in Lower Norfolk and Nansemond counties had followed him there. In



Leonard Calvert

Maryland, the Puritans continued to worship as they saw fit, occasionally seeking advice from the ministry of New England. By 1650, there were no congregations in Virginia that could rightfully be called Puritan.

Ironically, news of the resolution of the civil war in England reached Virginia in the summer of 1649, just after most of its Puritans had relocated north. Charles I had been tried by Parliament and executed, and Berkeley, who had done so much to encourage Virginia's intolerance of Puritanism, found himself without political support in England. Though Virginia initially refused to recognize the Commonwealth government of England, it **capitulated** [<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/surrender-to-parliament-treaty-of-jamestown/>] on March 12, 1652, and Berkeley was ousted later that year.

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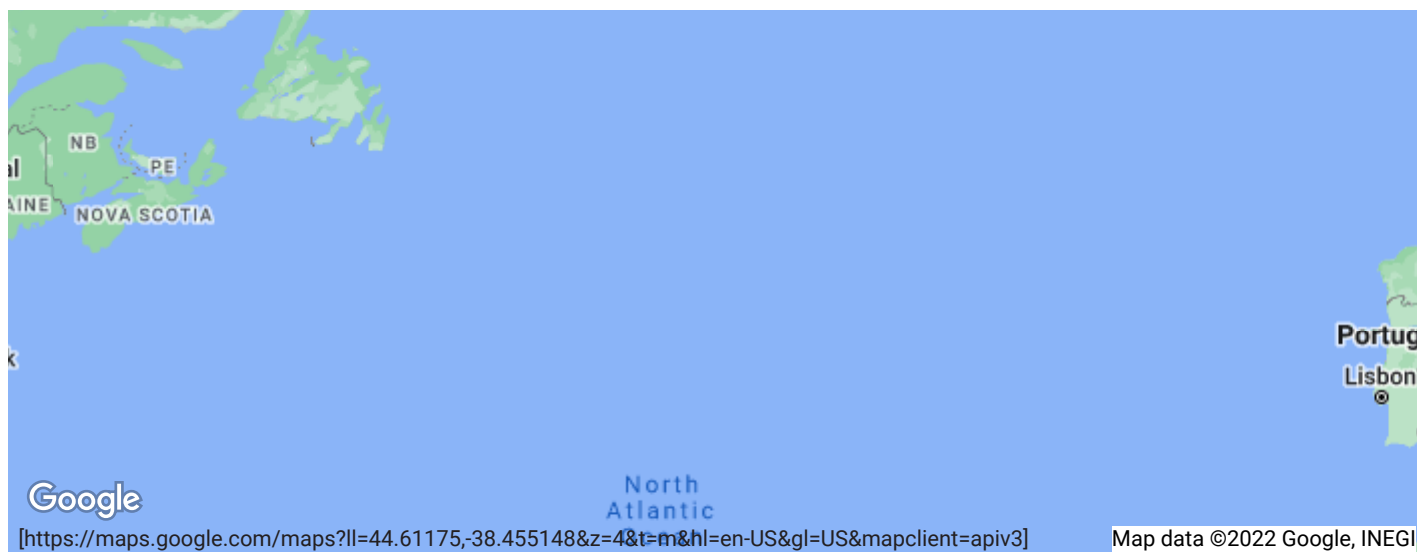
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MAP





TIMELINE

1609

A letter reports an "unhappy dissension" among the settlers at Jamestown "by reason of their Minister," who is "somewhat a Puritan."

1617

Sir Edwin Sandys leads the negotiations with the Leyden Puritans that results in the journey of the *Mayflower* and the Pilgrim Fathers in 1620.

1619

Puritan leader Christopher Lawne and his followers settle in the Southside region of Virginia.

1621

Edward Bennett, one of the great London and Amsterdam merchants and auditor of the Virginia Company of London, patents a large property called Bennett's Welcome near the former Indian village of Warraskoyack in what will become Isle of Wight County.

1628

About this year, Richard Bennett travels to Virginia to take over management of Bennett's Welcome from his uncle, Edward Bennett. In the next ten years he will patent more than 2,000 acres of his own and amass more than 7,000 acres in Virginia and Maryland.

1629

Richard Bennett is elected to the House of Burgesses as a representative from Warrosquyoake.

1631

Richard Bennett becomes a commissioner for Warrosquyoake.

1640

Having amassed thousands of acres of land in Virginia and Maryland and imported 600 settlers, many of them Puritans, Richard Bennett establishes a base of political influence.

1642

Sir William Berkeley arrives in Virginia as the new governor and captain general of the colony.

1642

Richard Bennett is appointed to the governor's Council. In the same year he patents 2,000 acres along the south bank of the Rappahannock River and recruits three Puritan ministers from the Massachusetts Bay Colony to serve the Calvinists of Upper Norfolk County.

July 15, 1642

In a letter to Reverend John Davenport of New Haven, Puritan William Durand writes that God has condemned "many poore soules in Virginia" for their ungodly conduct, and "if ever the lord had cause to consume the cittyes of Sodom and Gomorrah he might justly and more severely execute his wrath upon Virginia."

1643

Governor Sir William Berkeley and the General Assembly agree to legislation ordering that "all nonconformists ... shall be compelled to depart the collony with all conveniencie."

January 1643

Three ministers from New England—William Thompson, John Knowles, and Thomas James—arrive in Jamestown in response to a petition signed by some seventy Virginia Puritans.

April 18, 1644

Opechancanough and a force of Powhatan Indians launch a second great assault against the English colonists, initiating the Third Anglo-Powhatan War. As many as 400 colonists are killed, but rather than press the attack, the Indians retire.

January 3, 1645

The English Parliament passes a law abolishing the use of the Book of Common Prayer in the Church of England's services.

April 1645

Thomas Harrison, the Puritan minister of Lower Norfolk County's Elizabeth River vestry, is charged with criminal nonconformity "for not reading the booke of Common Prayer and for not administering the sacrament of Baptisme according to the Cannons and order p[re]scribed."

1646

Richard Bennett organizes a mercenary Puritan army to assist the exiled governor of Maryland, Leonard Calvert, in ousting a gang of brigands from his capital at Saint Mary's City.

1647

Puritan minister Thomas Harrison leaves the Elizabeth River parish and begins ministering in neighboring Nansemond County.

November 1647

The General Assembly passes an act reinforcing the use of the Book of Common Prayer by allowing parishioners to withhold tithes from nonconforming ministers.

1648

Governor Sir William Berkeley banishes nonconforming Puritans Thomas Harrison and William Durand from Virginia. Durand settles in Maryland.

1648—1650

A vast Puritan migration to Maryland is led, in part, by a group of Puritan mercenaries who came to the colony in 1646 under the leadership of Richard Bennett.

May 28, 1648

William Durand, who had been ministering to the Puritans of Lower Norfolk County in Thomas Harrison's absence, is arrested for nonconformity by the county sheriff.

1652—1660

No longer governor, Sir William Berkeley remains in Virginia, enlarging his house, continuing his crop trials, and strengthening his commercial ties abroad. He remains on good terms with Puritan Virginians while still maintaining contact with the exiled Charles II.

July 5, 1652

Governor Richard Bennett and a select group of Virginia Puritan émigrés end a decade of Indian warfare in Maryland by negotiating a comprehensive peace treaty with the powerful Susquehannocks.

March 25, 1655

The bloody Battle of the Severn is fought between the Catholic pro-Calvert forces and Puritans near Governor Richard Bennett's own lands at Greenbury Point, Maryland.

December 1, 1656

The General Assembly convenes and commissions Edward Digges to represent the colony's interests in London, especially regarding political turbulence in Maryland, where Puritans have wrested control from the proprietary governor.

1657–1658

During the winter, Edward Digges, in London as a lobbyist on behalf of Virginia, helps to negotiate a settlement of the political strife in Maryland, where Puritans have wrested control from the proprietary governor.

March 1660

William Claiborne, despite being a supporter of Parliament and the Puritans, helps ease the return to the governorship of Sir William Berkeley just prior to Charles II's return.

March 1661

William Claiborne, a supporter of Parliament and the Puritans, retires from public life not long after Charles II returns to England as king.

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